

MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

Success Stories from the Field

Winston Salem Inds For Blind

North Carolina Manufacturing Extension Partnership

Winston Salem Industries for the Blind Saves With Lean

Client Profile:

Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind (IFB) in Asheville, North Carolina, manufactures many different items for the U.S. military, including quilted, camouflage poncho liners, brown t-shirts, a flyer's kit bag, and hundreds of impulse merchandising products sold in commissaries around the world. About 40 of the 70 people employed at the not-for-profit business are blind.

Situation:

In late 2004, Chris McGraw, a specialist with the North Carolina State University Industrial Extension Service (IES), a NIST MEP network affiliate, received a call from the North Carolina Department of Commerce requesting that he visit IFB to see how to help them improve productivity and reduce waste. He realized that lean principles would help, but the challenge was making lean tools "visible" to the blind employees.

Solution:

IES General Manager, Randy Buckner, and IES specialist, McGraw, developed a plan they implemented throughout 2005, beginning with a lean 100 course to introduce the basic lean concepts to employees. NCSU lean specialists worked in the following product line areas to help reduce waste and improve productivity:

- In the flyer's kit bag area, the employees worked with NCSU specialists to set up a new cell (layout), reducing the need for overtime in that area and saving about 250 hours annually. After recognizing the waste in this process, they were able to combine three jobs into one and eliminate the need for a new hire, saving an additional 2,000 hours.

- In the Impulse Merchandising Product area, IFB employees make 400 different products. Using lean processes, they freed up supervisory time, improving order cycle time from five to three days and increasing their order fill rate by 2 percent. That 2 percent translated immediately to their bottom line as it increased their sales dollars by the same percentage. This process also freed up some 2,000 square feet of floor space, which allowed IFB to bring in an additional product line, a moisture wicking T-shirt. They implemented this new line in April 2006, adding 12 new employees and increasing sales significantly due to this expansion.

- Lean activities such as 5S and standard work created safer environments for the blind employees. Better organization also meant blind people didn't waste time trying to find things. One simple process is a flag system. A bicycle flag has been mounted in a fixed location to certain work stations, within easy reach of employees. When a person gets low on work, they pull the flag and a material handler provides them with more work. This eliminates time spent waiting for more work, and the employees don't have to speak up loudly to receive the work.

NCSU lean specialists continue to assist IFB with this new product line, recently helping them determine a new, more efficient layout for the sewing lines, improving quality by setting up systems to determine material defects versus sewing defects. More activities are scheduled throughout 2006.

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Results:

- * Saved more than \$337,000 annually.
- * Provided more jobs for blind, legally blind, and sighted people.
- * Created safer working environment.

Testimonial:

"The NCSU people have been very helpful. They not only help us with lean processes, but they are helping us implement lean for blind people; they bring in fresh eyes to help our blind people."

Anthony Hall, Production Manager